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LOSS'S GRAMMAR: REWRITING AIDS THROUGH BLACK GRIEF

Roy Pérez

The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS by Dagmawi Woubshet. The *Callaloo* African Diaspora Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 169 pp. Cloth: \$38.95

Remarkably “the first book-length study of AIDS in the humanities at the intersection of black and queer studies” (26), *The Calendar of Loss* also stands out for Dagmawi Woubshet’s exacting attunement to aesthetic form in the early AIDS archive. Suggesting that AIDS cultural studies has been long occupied with the facts and discursive entanglements of AIDS—its consequential “truths” (25)—Woubshet frames his project explicitly on the literary and visual poetics of the early era of AIDS and in particular its transmission of acute grief. As he moves comparatively among works by black and white artists, beginning in the United States and ending in Ethiopia, Woubshet identifies an experience of cataclysm, shared across race, that sets the poetics of early AIDS cultural production apart from canonical notions of expressed mourning. This sense of cataclysm, along with the reality that most of the authors of these early years of the pandemic worked in the face of their own impending deaths, brings these works together as part of a tradition that Woubshet uniquely identifies as a “poetics of compounding loss,” connected historically to flashpoints of collective, overwhelming grief. This historicization reverses the conventional racial dynamics of AIDS cultural memory, wherein black authors appear as a minor note in predominantly white subcanons of

American art. Instead, Woubshet takes a soft brush to white AIDS expression to reveal its debt to black loss, placing these works in a concealed racial history of grief's uneven distribution. Through Woubshet's archival and cultural realignment, we begin to understand all AIDS writing as participating in, rather than inaugurating, an American poetics of compounding loss that finds its origin point not in the white urban middle class but in the Middle Passage. The phenomenon by which the white expressions of AIDS mourning find themselves estranged from the chain of American catastrophes experienced by its other "disprized" subjects reveals divergent calendars of loss (5). In the American literary history of mass grief as charted by Woubshet, the AIDS crisis is but one flashpoint among many important others that emerge when we read through a black lens.

Woubshet moves gracefully among media, and his intense attention to the formal manifestations of compounding loss and its inconsolability binds his archive together across genres and contexts. Without overstating any extraordinary divergence among his texts, I mean to highlight the exceptional coherence that Woubshet's concept of compounding loss (and his interpretive technique) lends to his archive. This compounding emerges as repetitions, lists, restagings, densities, anticipations,

and other strategies that signify borne-but-unbearable accumulations of grief. In three of the book's four chapters, a focus on written genres of mourning—the lyric, the obituary, and the epistle—allows Woubshet to remap the literary history of forms that emerge in response to the AIDS pandemic. The poetry of AIDS finds precedent in slave spirituals; the normative formula of the obituary emerges, in contrast to the improvised black queer eulogy, as a mode of containment; and letters to the dead reveal the ways in which loss warps time and defers grief. Woubshet moves black expressions of grief to the root of grief's artistic forms, "eschew[ing] a model of AIDS scholarship that isolates people of color in a separate chapter, away from and contingent on the experiences of white gay men" (6). His method does not sideline the well-trod white canon of AIDS cultural production as though to simply remove it from this history but engages it within a new historical frame that peels away its Europhilic veneer.

For example, in chapter 1, "Lyric Mourning: Sorrow Songs and the AIDS Elegy," Woubshet reads Paul Monette's book of poems *Love Alone* alongside Melvin Dixon's *Love's Instruments*. Both of these works demonstrate one of the ways in which Woubshet separates early AIDS poetics from other "normative grammars of

loss" (29): the temporal proximity of the speaker's own death, the calendar of loss according to which a narrator is "elegizing another and elegizing oneself," proleptically and simultaneously (29). Woubshet gives this formal dimension of both Monette's and Dixon's elegiac writing tender, and meticulous, readings. Although the two works share this poetics of a proximity to death, divergent calendars emerge when Woubshet enfolds Monette in black experience. What is lost for each poet, and what are the social dimensions of these losses? For Monette, AIDS interrupts an arch of prosperity marked as white, manifest in a sense of peace and luxury that is suddenly ripped asunder by the mass loss of lovers and friends. Dixon's work invokes no such nostalgia. At the start of the chapter, Woubshet introduces the slave spiritual—a touchstone for Dixon's writing—as an American origin point for mass loss, collective grief, and the commonplace nature of death for the long disprized. Woubshet asks what might appear in the temporality and social landscape of AIDS if we situate Monette's work in a history of catastrophic and everyday black loss, rather than in a fantasy of white, prelapsarian safety and innocence. Returning to Dixon, we see the ways in which black gay vernacular draws emotionally and poetically from the "interminable, hauntingly elliptical figure of the spiritual" to

process inconceivable decimation (46). Each author's poetics reveals a different calendar of loss, a different archive, as the power of metaphor thins in the face of compounding grief, "index[ing] how the early AIDS experience placed those living with AIDS, regardless of race, in a situation resembling slavery's ubiquity of the dead" (53).

If the archive of published literary work for Woubshet's chapter on the lyric is fairly conventional, his chapters on the obituary and the epistle assemble more "unthought-of queer places" (27) and genres of writing into a vital archive of AIDS poetics. Chapter 2, "Archiving the Dead: AIDS Obituaries and Final Innings," first traces the formal conventions of the classic newspaper obituary in order to establish how the "normative grammar" of loss in mainstream venues such as the *New York Times* produced homophobic silences. Turning again to ACT UP, Woubshet frames the group's 1991 "Clip and Mail AIDS Obits" campaign as a fundamentally formalist political intervention that contested the social purview of the obituary by belying its presumptive limits and its dubiously privileged claims to posterity. A tradition of black, queer railing against the terms of one's posthumous future again puts early AIDS resistance in its historical place when Woubshet places the contested queer obituary alongside the papers of Assotto Saint and

the short story "The Final Inning" by Thomas Glave. The contested obituary comes to life in the context of the black funeral and Glave's short story, loosely based on a real-life story told to him by Saint, in which the deceased man's lover interrupts the proceedings with a spitting-mad dose of truth about his lover's queerness, to a swirl of gossiping murmurs and wails from the attendees. Told in columns that capture a heteroglossic flurry of complaints and amens in response to the truth-telling rant, the scene shores up Woubshet's brilliant historicization of the forms and poetics of early AIDS protest strategies within black queer expressive traditions that were intimate with mass grief as one disprized population within another.

Among the most convincing and gratifying moments in Woubshet's method of critique are when he captures and discredits the disprizing of AIDS poetics (and by extension AIDS-affected subjects) by cultural tastemakers. Woubshet bristles at one prominent poet's pronouncement in 2004 that early AIDS poetry will have long-term "value" only if it understands AIDS as "mere context" (54). The best AIDS poetry will not be about AIDS *per se* but about "something more timelessly true about the human condition" (54). Woubshet stakes his book's claim against this detachment of the social ("mere context") from

the aesthetic, arguing instead that the formal advents of AIDS poetry owe their emergence precisely to context—the nonnormative relations, inconsolable grief, proximity of death, and temporalities of cataclysmic social loss are particular to the most disprized victims of AIDS.

Similarly, chapter 3, "Visions of Loss: Hip Hop, Apocalypse, and AIDS," points to art criticism that falls into a pattern of projecting white, bourgeois racial perspectives on the work of Keith Haring that cast him as the fine artist slumming it among graffiti "writers" (90). Haring's position straddling the line between gallery and "street" certainly worked to his advantage, and Woubshet does not exonerate Haring for the ways in which the artist capitalized on his uneven and politically dubious partnerships with artists and lovers of color (a "queer economy of collaboration" for which Ricardo Montez uses the word "trade").¹ Haring's journals, from which Woubshet draws some material context, do reveal a much cannier awareness of structural white-supremacist dynamics than his critics exhibit, particularly in his rage at the murder of the black graffiti artist Michael Stewart by police in 1983. "Most white men are evil," opens one passage to which Woubshet brings our attention (95). "I'm ashamed of my forefathers. I am *not* like them" (96). But Woubshet's primary focus is

on the ways in which Haring's aesthetics—what we might call his visual poetics, in line with the book's terms—draws on black and Latino vernaculars not just for profit but to find expression for the compounding losses to AIDS that assaulted these disprized queer communities located off the main drag (*cum* canon) of white AIDS cultural production.

That a sanitized version of Haring's imaginary becomes emblematic of this canon makes Woubshet's turn to Haring's graphic and bleak (though not humorless) "apocalyptic" works all the more valuable, especially as a riposte to the mass-produced popular version of Haring we see in shops today. Woubshet offers an overdue formal treatment of the hard-core strand of Haring's work and the way it captures the sense of immense (indeed, in Haring's eschatology, biblical) calamity that defined the early years of AIDS. But again, this deep treatment sets up a brilliant cross-racial move, beginning with Haring's response to the Michael Stewart murder but then moving to Haring's political indictment of American humanitarianism in Africa in light of racial apartheid at home. And most importantly, he critically restores the black contexts of Haring's apocalyptic (and hopeful) poetics in early hip hop and its emergence "in tandem with AIDS art and activism" (95). Woubshet opens formal channels between

1980s hip hop and AIDS cultural production, an artistic intersection that merges more purposefully in the 1990s. While some scholars have given important critical attention to the limits, thefts, and damages of Haring's racial sojourning (and others ignore it altogether), Woubshet draws radical possibility in Haring's work through formal and historical art-world contextualization: "This critical view of race is a leitmotif of Haring's work, a political temperament that distinguishes his art from that of his pop art predecessors of the 1950s and '60s" (99).

The breadth of comparative possibility for Woubshet's approach to AIDS cultural production via poetics and black queer studies truly crystallizes in the book's final chapter, "Epistles to the Dead: AIDS Orphans and the Work of Mourning," which jumps from the early 1980s to the '90s, from the United States to Ethiopia, and, most poignantly, from adult gay men to children whom Woubshet figures as queer, whose photographs and writing about AIDS-inflicted grief "belie[] the normative symbols of childhood's innocence and futurity" (125). Their heartbreaking letters to deceased parents, written in Amharic as part of a program called Sudden Flowers, reveal their own poetics of compounding loss, tying them to counterparts in the United States but also finding unique rhetorical and spiritual affordances in

Amharic's "repertoire of phrases that use separation as a euphemism for death" (116). Such euphemisms prove powerful in a work of mourning that solicits more time with the dead with which to know compounding loss, one grief at a time. Haunting, minimalist portraits created by and featuring the children perform a similar exhortation, lingering between the intimate and the public but resisting the spectacle of AIDS catastrophe.

The integration of poetic analysis, literary and visual studies, and black queer studies across such a richly contrasted set of texts makes *The Calendar of Loss* an impressive and vital achievement, not only for its insights into the early era of AIDS art and politics but also for its exemplary use of interdisciplinary and comparative methods to reach into the heart of an intimate and difficult affective realm. Lucid

and artful, Woubshet's writing will prove immediately indispensable in the study of AIDS and of grief's distinct poetic forms.

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NOTES

1. Ricardo Montez, "'Trade Marks': LA2, Keith Haring, and a Queer Economy of Collaboration," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 425.